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Opening the black box – The making of India's foreign policy

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ABSTRACT

Most studies looking at India's external policies continue to "black-box" the actual process of how Indian foreign policy is made. More specifically, most studies generally overlook how India's complex domestic polity and bureaucratic apparatus shape India's foreign policy outlook. Unlike works on India's security policy which have built from and contributed to broader academic debates, studies on India's foreign policy have failed to directly engage with concepts and theories developed by the sub-discipline of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). Why have these concepts and approaches not been consistently applied to the Indian context? There are various reasons for this, ranging from these disciplines' excessive reliance on Western case studies, or the lack of interest in mainstream International Relations scholarship by South Asianists (in contrast to disciplines such as economics, political theory, and developmental studies, all of which have benefited from the Indian experience). This *special issue* is a step towards bridging this gap and to encourage a greater dialogue between FPA and the systematic study of Indian foreign policy. Through the careful analysis of specific case studies, the different papers offer a conceptually grounded and empirically innovative reading of India's foreign policy across time, space, and themes.

'We believe that our common prosperity and security require us to evolve, through dialogue, a common rules-based order for the region. And, it must equally apply to all individually as well as to the global commons. Such an order must believe in sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as equality of all nations, irrespective of size and strength. These rules and norms should be based on the consent of all, not on the power of the few. This must be based on faith in dialogue, and not dependence on force'.

Narendra Modi, India's Prime Minister, 2018 Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore.¹

The salience of this speech increased in the light of Modi's historic electoral victory in 2019 that offered the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) a bigger political mandate than it received in 2014. During Modi's first

term in office, India has unilaterally rejected China's ambitious Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI), and withstood a months-long military standoff at Doklam near Bhutan with the People's Liberation Army in 2017. All this was done without jeopardizing official channels of communication with Beijing. In restating India's desire to see a multipolar world based on common rules and norms, Modi underlined India's traditional reliance on rules and institutions to offset capability deficits. Lauded by Indian observers as his Nehruvian moment, Modi's statement was viewed as India's response to the evolving global order in light of China's rising power potential and assertiveness, and the tumult caused by the US president Donald Trump's erratic policy.²

The Shangri La speech generated much analysis on the implications of Modi's foreign policy on the world in general and South Asia in particular.³ Much like the speech, its analysis too was emblematic of how India's foreign policy has been studied over the years. It underlined the shared impression that prime ministers are the most powerful arbiters of India's foreign policy, that historical mistrust and structural imbalance continues to drive India's rivalries with China and Pakistan, and that India's rapprochement with the US, though mature, is still far from being an enduring strategic partnership that many envisage. The difference is of scale i.e. China's increasing engagement with India's smaller neighbors in addition to Pakistan has complicated India's regional strategy and dominance.⁴ However, when making these assessments, most observers continue to "black-box" the actual process of how Indian foreign policy is made. More specifically, most studies generally overlook how India's complex domestic polity and bureaucratic apparatus shape India's foreign policy outlook.

Without a doubt, one can argue that there has been an interlocking spike in India's global prominence and scholarship on its foreign policy in recent years. Nonetheless, unlike works on India's security policy (in particular its nuclear programme) which have built from and contributed to broader academic debates,⁵ studies on India's foreign policy have failed to directly engage with concepts and theories developed by the sub-discipline of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). In truth, some studies of India's foreign policy directly derived insights from International Relations (IR) theories that had begun to include domestic politics and decision-making factors such as neoclassical realism and variations of liberalism and constructivism.⁶

Over the last decade, some scholars have accordingly incorporated domestic political institutions, national strategic culture, leaders' perceptions and ideational predispositions as relevant factors to account for some of India's foreign policy decisions.⁷ While these works moved away from the assumption that international-systemic constraints solely dictate India's external behavior, domestic factors have mainly been integrated as intervening or secondary variables which can account for why the Indian state did not react,

or did so in a lagged fashion, to pressures emanating from changes in the material distribution of power at the international level. Most of these mainstream IR approaches often privilege a single variable over others, whether it is the ability to extract and mobilize national resources, the innate constraints of certain political regimes or a national cultural predisposition, but do not explain *how* and *when* these factors become salient and, possibly, jointly interact in the foreign policy making process to explain particular outcomes. For instance, following the May 2019 reelection of the BJP-led coalition (with a broader popular mandate), a greater emphasis should be put on studies investigating whether the BJP has a distinctive ideological perspective when formulating and implementing its foreign policy agenda or whether Prime Minister Narendra Modi's cognitive priors actively shape his worldview and management of the foreign policy making process.⁸

As a result, while some of these existing studies increasingly take domestic politics and decision-making seriously, they also overlook decades of research in FPA and many theoretical approaches which have been introduced, tested, and refined to disaggregate further the domestic political processes and factors which can shape foreign policy decisions.⁹ These studies have notably demonstrated that the linkages between domestic politics and international politics are far more complex than portrayed. As a result, FPA does not offer a comprehensive theory but rather a series of more specific causal explanations for different pieces of these linkages between the domestic and international arena such as the bureaucratic politics model, the organizational process model, leadership trait analysis, the role of decision-making units, the influence of partisan preferences, variations in legislative-executive relations, and coalition politics among others.¹⁰

Why have these concepts and approaches not been consistently applied to the Indian context? There are various reasons for this, ranging from these disciplines' excessive reliance on Western case studies, or the lack of interest in mainstream International Relations scholarship by South Asianists (in contrast to disciplines such as economics, political theory, and developmental studies, all of which have benefited from the Indian experience).¹¹ This *special issue* is a step toward bridging this gap and to encourage a greater dialogue between FPA and the systematic study of Indian foreign policy (IFP). It offers a conceptually grounded and empirically innovative reading of India's foreign policy across time, space, and themes.

In the remainder of this introductory note, we first offer a brief overview of the small but emerging scholarly literature on the study of India's foreign policy and emphasize its present limitations. Second, building from the discipline of FPA, we conceptually lay out what we collectively understand in this *special issue* as foreign policy and the process of foreign policy-making. Third, we discuss some of the key theoretical and empirical insights

on Indian foreign policy from the different contributions to this *special issue*. Finally, we conclude with suggestions as how to move the dialogue between FPA and IFP further.

Study of India's foreign policy (IFP)

India's rise often raises questions about what kind of power it will become. Though economically and politically powerful, it is yet to demonstrate leadership on issues of global relevance. Increasingly assertive in the military domain, it remains limited in terms of power projection beyond its periphery. Electorally democratic, it is facing a deeply majoritarian moment, and remains open to engaging with authoritarian regimes. It is expanding capacities, but remains limited in its capabilities. Given the canvass of India's diversity, ambition, and challenges, how to Indian policymakers' debate, formulate, and implement foreign policies? Which level of analysis takes analytical precedence? Who is involved in the process of Indian foreign policy-making?

These questions have been addressed in an excellent body of literature on Indian foreign policy, which cuts across time, themes, and geography. This literature can be divided into three broad categories. One, that covers India's relationship with its immediate neighbors and big powers. Rivalry with Pakistan and China (in South Asia and beyond), fluctuations in relations with Russia, and a steady (if limited) improvement of ties with the US, are issues that have traditionally been central to the study of India's foreign affairs. Be it bilaterally or multilaterally, it has been argued that India endeavors to shape a favorable strategic environment by using a mix of diplomacy and coercion when engaging with other states.¹² However, much of this literature has not been able to explain the variation in India's policies both with its different South Asian neighbors and across time. By focusing mainly on governmental rhetoric and foreign policy outcomes, these studies have generally assumed a greater deal of intentionality rather than investigating the complex inter-linkages between domestic political contestation, bureaucratic turf battles, and actual policy implementation.

Two, as India is increasingly perceived as a key global power, there has been burgeoning literature on how India responds to global issues such as (but not just) climate change and nuclear nonproliferation. The latter issue in particular has been studied in tremendous detail and has come to shape global debates and actions on nuclear energy.¹³ However, again here the scholarship has largely neglected the study of the domestic politics of foreign policy-making in India.¹⁴ Some observers have assumed that India would automatically seek fundamental changes in the existing international system as its relative economic, military and diplomatic weight grows. Consequently, some explanations have envisaged possible tensions between established

powers and a partly revisionist India.¹⁵ Another strand in the literature argues that institutional attributes like the existence of a democratic system would lead a rising power like India to become a natural supporter of the liberal international order and to gain more space within it.¹⁶ These two scholarships have overlooked much of the internal dynamics linked to the process of “rising” in international politics. For instance, are the domestic (and local) politics of a rising democracy like India equally (if not more) decisive to explain foreign policy outcomes?

Three, there is an increasing focus on India’s foreign decision-making institutions, policy drivers, as well as ideas and ideologies that shape India’s external affairs since Independence.¹⁷ Foreign policy has traditionally been under the command of the prime minister’s office (PMO). However, the burst of private media houses, big businesses, the NGO sector, and private think-tanks since mid-1990s has fundamentally impacted foreign policy decision-making in India.¹⁸ Even state governments, though with limited constitutional leverage to participate in the foreign policy-making process, have shaped the central government’s foreign policy approach on various occasions.¹⁹ This leg of literature on IFP is still developing unlike the first two strands on which one would find established and accumulated knowledge. These categories are not exclusive and imbue tremendous thematic diversity covering issues ranging from security and politics to economics and international law.

Given the difficulty of access to primary sources, limited archival material, and excessive focus on policy output and implications, there has only been limited study of policy-making *processes*. When there has been a dedicated study of India’s foreign and security policy-making, the breakthrough is often made by historians instead of political scientists.²⁰ Reflective of a traditional, and counter-productive, disconnect between political scientists and historians, such lack of focus on foreign policy decision-making in India’s case is an issue that requires urgent scholarly attention. In addition, as students of India’s external relations begin to study the domestic politics of IFP, it is important to build on the existing substantive bodies of literature on Indian domestic and regional politics, political economy, social movements, identity politics, clientelism and trust networks, and state institutions, among others. It is important to study decision-making not just to better understand Indian politics but also to appreciate the regional and global implications of India’s foreign policy holistically.

Another issue is that scholars interested in the study of IFP have traditionally focused on foreign policy *actions* since these are seemingly easier to observe and measure. This is problematic as intentionality is often (over-) assumed from the standpoint of policy outcomes. As a result, the *process* of decision-making is overlooked or simplified. Decisions show a degree of intentionality but the final policy action is not always implemented as

decision-makers initially foresaw it. Some decisions never actually result in actions. It then becomes important to conceptually distil policy decisions and outcomes. As this *special issue* demonstrates, such distinctions, though seemingly obvious, throw surprising and sometimes counterintuitive results about Indian foreign policy.

Foreign policy analysis

In the context of this *special issue*, and in order to foster dialogue with the broader FPA scholarship, it is important to specify the conceptual parameters of what we mean by “foreign policy”. Traditionally, foreign policy is defined as the external behavior, i.e. the decision(s) and/or action(s) of states that have consequences over other states or political entities outside of the state.²¹ However, the distinction with domestic policy is often blurred. In the current context of globalization, most political decisions have external implications in one way or another. Additionally, scholars often use the term foreign policy loosely to discuss different phenomena. While some scholars discuss specific and individual foreign policy decisions and/or actions taking place at particular historical junctures, others look at policy evolution over decades, which are often the accumulated and gradual result of a sum of external actions.

Structural theories of IR such as (neo-) realism, (neo-) liberalism, or even the wider bracket of constructivist thought, though focusing on state behavior, are usually un-interested in the specifics of foreign policy. They do not delve into operational level policy debates, and are largely unencumbered by the push-and-pull of foreign policy decision-making. FPA fills this gap. Actor-specific in its focus, FPA offers a “connection to the empirical ground” upon which most IR theories are based.²² As Valerie Hudson posits, FPA is based on the premise that interactions between states are “grounded in human decision makers acting singly or in groups”, and it allows the study of international relations to “reclaim its ability to manifest human agency, with its attendant change, creativity, accountability, and meaning”.²³ FPA is also the study of the sequence of decisions and of the discrepancy between the two stages of decision-making and decision implementation. Inactions can also be important foreign policy instances to study.

With its genesis in the Cold War, FPA has traditionally been Western-centric, and applies modernist approaches such as rational choice theory, bureaucratic politics, and organizational behavior. Barring Jeffrey Benner’s *Structure of Decision* (1984) that decoded India’s foreign policy-making bureaucracy, India’s foreign policy has hardly ever been analyzed using FPA concepts. Even, for that matter, the case of India has hardly ever been used to engage with and enrich conceptual debates within FPA.²⁴ For instance, few works on IFP equate with Allison and Zelikow’s trademark study of US decision-making during the Cuban Missile Crisis.²⁵ Given the

vibrancy of India's democracy and the complexity of its decision-making process, it is surprising that little work exists on this.²⁶ It is notable that IFP scholars focus mostly on foreign policy actions, thereby neglecting the precise and complex decision-making process leading to a particular decision.

In this *special issue*, we focus on specific and individual foreign policy actions and decisions rather than the sum of various external actions. Through this analytical focus, we argue it is important to re-emphasize omitted domestic, regional and policy-making variables. What we identify as individual decisions here are, among other instances, the decision or non-decision to go to war, sign a treaty/agreement, join an international organization or regime, react to a crisis initiated by a neighboring state, initiate a nuclear weapons program, send humanitarian aid to a particular country or region, sanction a state, and/or formalize a boundary/border.

FPA includes many approaches and emphasizes explanatory variables of interest to the study of IFP. It situates itself at the intersection of various other subfields within political science (IR, comparative politics, public policy) and integrates insights about domestic political and policy-making contexts. FPA also helps integrating insights from political psychology (perceptions, cognitive dispositions, learning, prospect theory) within the broader field of IR. It offers a particularly well-suited tool-kit to understand and theorize the under-examined role of institutions, organizations, bureaucracies, ideas, culture, collective and individual psychology in the Indian foreign policy making process. Table 1 offers an outlay of the various levels of analysis along which a state's foreign policy behavior may be explained:

Instead of being mutually exclusive, these levels of analysis are, often, deeply intertwined. They are not separate analytical categories that offer mechanistic explanations for a foreign policy decisions. For instance, neo-classical realism and liberal internationalism include domestic-level variables to explain variation in adaptation to structural factors. Similarly, two-level diplomacy approaches suggest that decision-makers take simultaneously into account international and domestic factors when formulating their foreign policy.²⁷ Consequently, these are dynamic terms from among which FPA allows to distil which ones are most important in the making and/or implementation of a foreign policy decision (or indecision). Though a wider

Table 1. Theoretical approaches traditionally used to study the different levels of analysis.

Level of Analysis	Approach
Structural-international	Realism, liberalism, rational choice
Governmental-institutional	Domestic institutions, Partisan, coalition politics
Bureaucratic-organizational	Bureaucracies, organizations
Societal	Identity, culture, public opinion, interest groups
Small group	Groupthink, Framing and advocacy
Individual	Psychology: Cognition, learning, emotion Leadership: Personalities, motivations, style

appreciation of these categories is important, it is the interplay between these levels of analysis that is critical. Articles in this *special issue* throw light on how different factors played into the formulation of a specific decision in the case of India.

Some key takeaways

Amongst the 9 contributions to this *special issue*, most focus on historical and contemporary foreign policy actions and decisions that have been labeled as puzzling and anomalous when considered under the lens of these traditional grand theories of IR. With the exception of the first article from Alden and Brummer that sets out a bridge-building agenda between FPA and the study of Indian's foreign policy, all the other articles systematically adopt and apply the multi-causal and process-oriented emphasis of FPA to explain the outcomes in particular case-studies. Within each chapter, the contributors lay out explicitly the various international, domestic, organizational, ideational and individual factors at play and analyze how the interaction of some of these variables and levels of analysis have varyingly shaped the formulation and implementation of specific Indian foreign policy decisions. The attention in these articles to a wider variety of variables does not preclude any attempt to present parsimonious approaches to the understanding of the sources of Indian foreign policy. Nevertheless, the contributors do aim to offer more complete explanations of some discrete events in India's international history which had yet to be satisfactorily addressed by the present literature. Accordingly, the contributors discuss past explanations and weigh both their weaknesses and insights vis-à-vis the explanatory leverage provided by building on new approaches derived from the FPA scholarship. Across these articles, there are some important overlaps and key insights which merit to be discussed.

All contributions to this *special issue* confirmed the methodological obstacles to the systematic study of IFP mentioned above, notably the difficulty to access primary data. For example, Alden and Brummer note that "the paucity of required source material or a lack of access to such material could represent a major impediment for conducting FPA studies in the Indian case". They argue that some FPA approaches require access to important sums of data. Restricted access to archived documents providing some insights in the decision-making process impedes any better understanding of how Indian leadership shapes foreign policy. It also limits analysis of the role that domestic Indian politics have had over the decision-making process. The consequence is that much of the existing scholarship actually ignores or marginalizes any effect of ideological and partisan politics within India over foreign policy issues. This problem is underlined by Basrur in his chapter on the decision-making process leading to operation Parakram. The absence of

direct access to any information over the deliberations between the Prime Minister, his cabinet, and close advisers hinders Basrur's efforts to uncover the essence of the Parakram decision. In spite of these practical limitations, Nachiappan, Paliwal, and Pardesi build on newly accessed data and new theoretical angles in their chapters to provide novel and more comprehensive perspectives that take domestic political processes seriously to account for key Indian foreign policy decisions on climate change negotiations, border settlement with Myanmar, and crisis management with China.

Some of the contributions of this *special issue* have identified theoretical and conceptual insights from FPA which could be useful for a more systematic and comparative study of IFP. For instance, Alden and Brummer observe how existing FPA approaches such as leadership trait analysis, coalition politics, and state-society relations could greatly contribute to a better appreciation of how Indian foreign policy is made and implemented. Much has been written in recent years about the western-centric nature of existing IR theory and about the inapplicability of some concepts to the Global South. But according to most articles in this *special issue*, many concepts seem to offer new avenues of research that had long been overlooked because of data access issues, and an impression that the Indian case was idiosyncratic. For instance, Blarel notes that India shares many institutional attributes with other Western European democracies and that arguments of how coalition politics affect the foreign policy-making processes can inform the study of similar processes in the Indian context, and vice-versa. Moreover, building on the emerging literature emphasizing two-level games and dynamics in Western cases, Basrur, Shankar, Pardesi, and Schottli equally look at how multi-level pressures at the international, regional, dyadic and domestic levels influence the Indian leadership's capacity to implement certain foreign policies.²⁸

Finally, some articles in this *special issue* identify the limitations of some FPA's concepts and theories when applied to a different complex political system like India's multi-ethnic federal and democratic polity. They also offer empirical, theoretical and conceptual insights that can contribute to broader FPA debates. Rather than discarding the Indian case as an outlier, Alden and Brummer argue that such conceptual and theoretical incongruities actually offer opportunities for FPA's formative concepts to be reconsidered and fine-tuned. Many of the contributions to this issue encourage this comparative enterprise. The study of specific Indian cases of foreign policy-making notably leads us to reinterpret or modify existing frameworks and introduce new concepts. In their respective chapters, Chadda and Paliwal call attention to the absence of problematizing of the state as a concept in IR, and in FPA more specifically. Breaking with the ahistorical and uncontested assumption of the Weberian state as the main unit of analysis in much of the FPA scholarship, they both argue that the state should be reconceptualized as

a dynamic entity and that the degree of development and control of a state needs over its territory, and notably over its periphery, affects its foreign policy motivations and its capacities used to implement its foreign policy.

Building on both historical and contemporary cases, Chadda and Paliwal posit that state-building processes within India and India's relations with its immediate neighbors are deeply interwoven developments. These articles encourage a more systematic analysis of state-society relations (and more specifically state-periphery) and its implications on foreign-policy making processes in India and in other cases. Furthermore, Blarel, but also Chadda, Paliwal, Pardesi and Schottli all suggest in their articles that the states/provinces/regions have directly and/or indirectly an important influence over India's foreign policy decisions. For example, Blarel suggests new causal mechanisms through which subnational actors can influence national foreign policy debates. He notably argues that the multi-level nature of coalition-building in a federal and pluralistic polity like India makes it necessary for national parties to take into account the inputs of regional interests when designing foreign policies. Is the role of subnational actors unique to India or are we observing similar dynamics in other cases, especially in the context of globalization and gradual decentralization of power? Can Indian cases provide empirical insights for wider international processes?

It is therefore hoped that these examples will illustrate that there are theoretical innovations emerging from India that can assist us in not only better understanding the study of foreign policy making in a particular part of the world, but can in fact provide greater insights into the field of foreign policy analysis as a whole.

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